CLASSIC FAIRY TALES

Hansel and Gretel

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Hansel and Gretel

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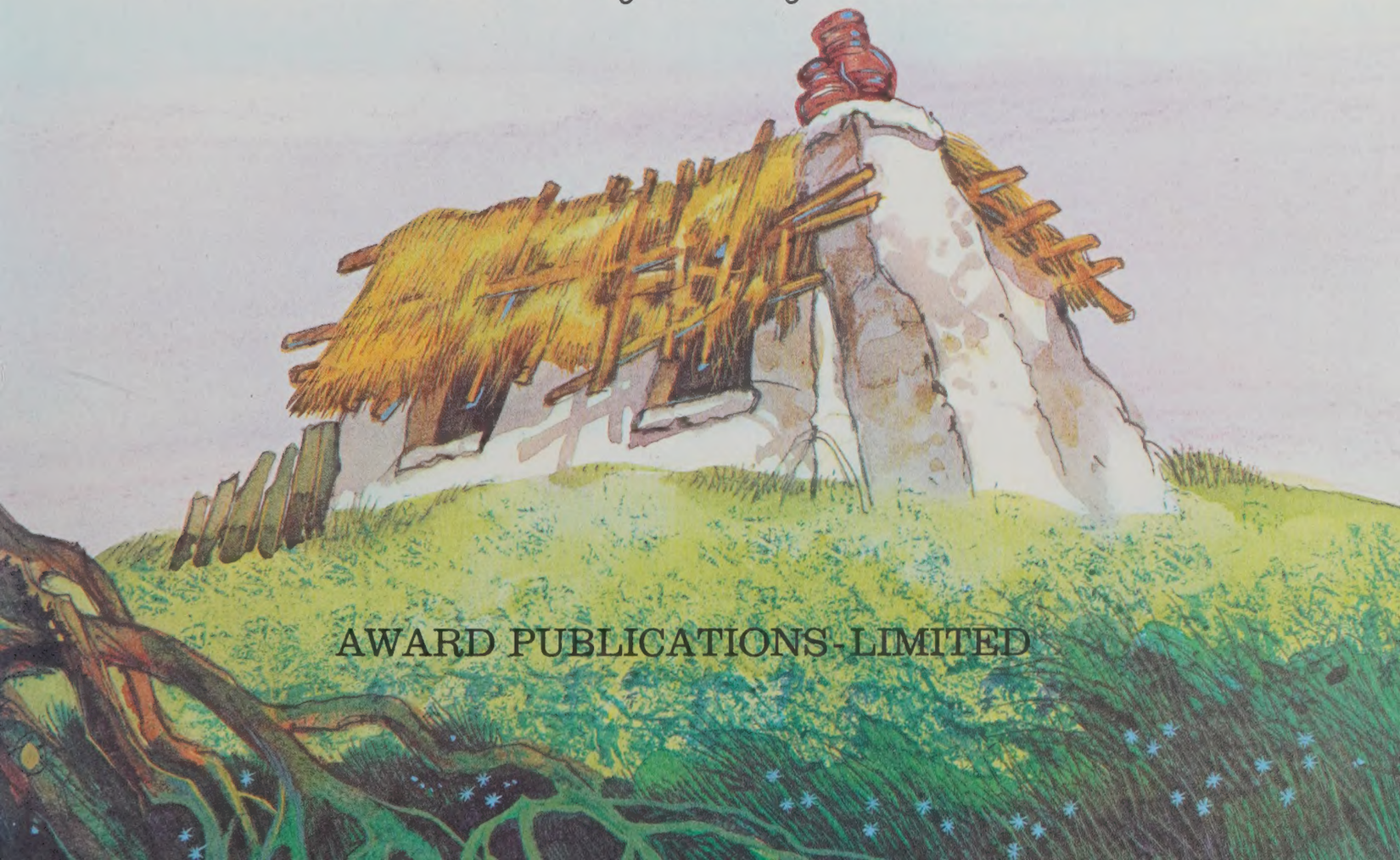

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Hansel and Gretel lived with their father and stepmother in a tiny cottage on the edge of the forest. Their father was a woodcutter and the family had always been poor.

Their father and stepmother were always arguing about money and the shortage of food.

"There is not enough food to feed the children," their stepmother would scream as she pointed angrily to the empty cupboards in the kitchen. Their poor father could only hold his head in his hands, full of despair.

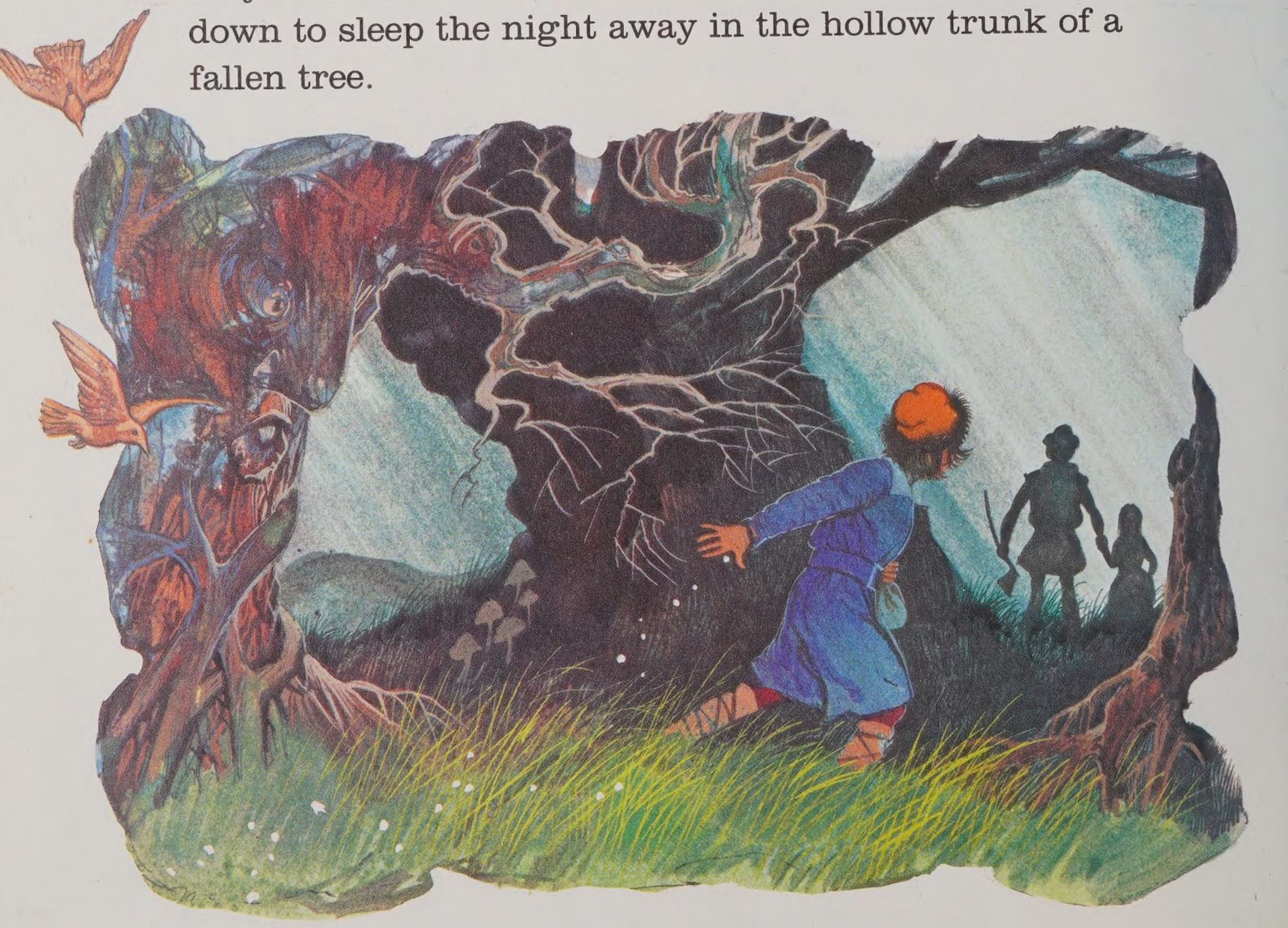
Then, one night Hansel overheard his stepmother persuade her husband that the only way to save any money was to take his children deep into the forest and leave them there.

Their father was very upset at this idea, but finally gave in to his bullying wife.

Next morning, the woodcutter tried to be cheerful as he set off with his two children into the forest. Even their stepmother smiled as she gave Hansel and Gretel each a crust of stale bread to eat on their journey.

As they walked deeper into the woods, Hansel stopped from time to time to break off a few crumbs from his bread and drop them along the path. At last they reached the thickest, darkest part of the forest and, as before, the woodcutter left his children, having kissed them lovingly.

Gretel felt sure Hansel had another plan to take them safely home again, and they both waited until darkness fell and the moon's bright light shone through the tall branches. But when Hansel took Gretel's hand to lead her back the way they had come, he couldn't see the breadcrumbs he had scattered. Birds had eaten every crumb! The children were so sad and heartbroken — they were now really lost! All they could do was settle down to sleep the night away in the hollow trunk of a fallen tree.



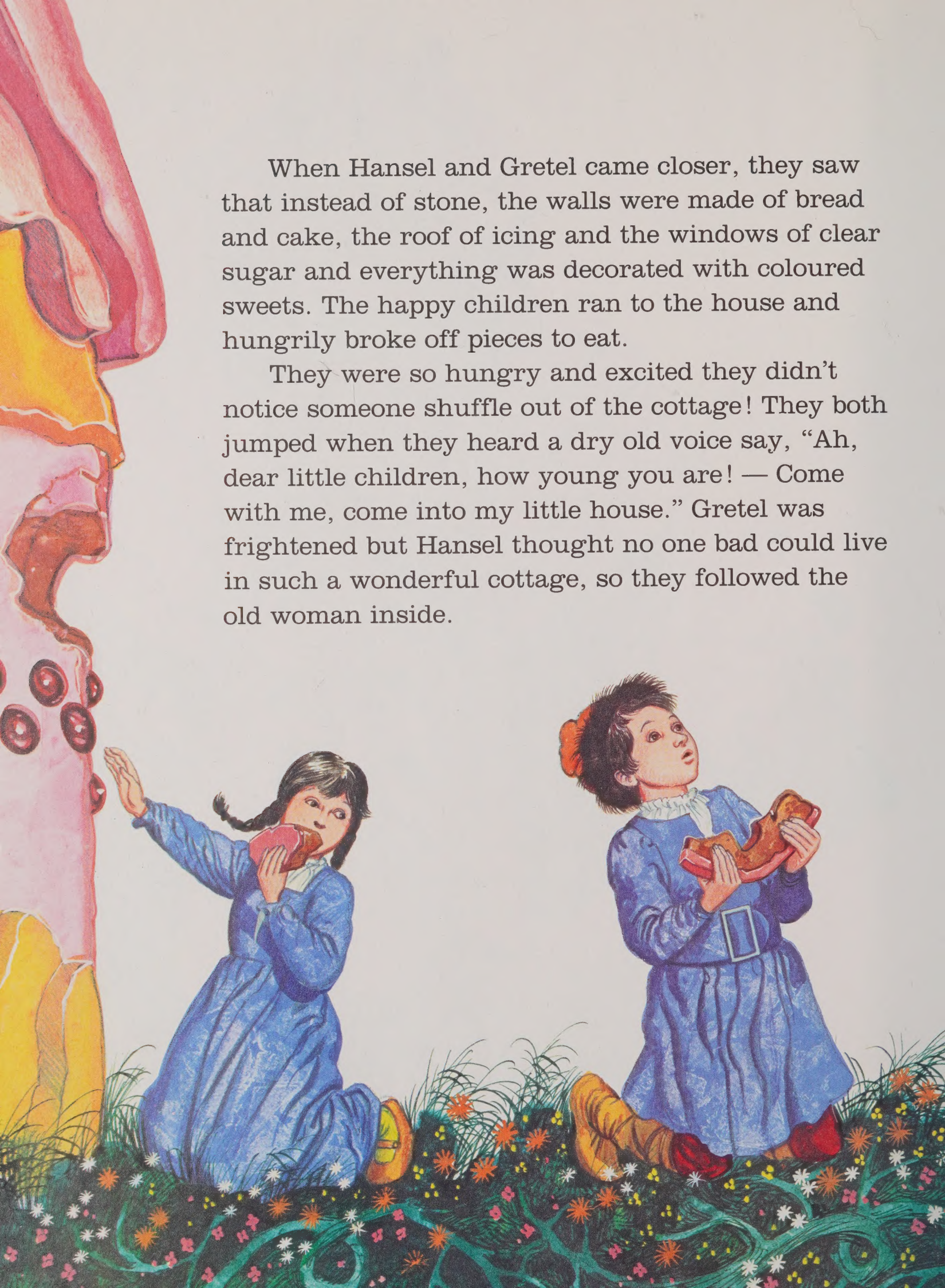
In the morning Hansel and Gretel were hungrier than ever. They were stiff and weak, but again began to walk hoping to find the way home.
They wandered from path to path, across clearings and through thick bushes.

After a while Hansel realized they were not alone; a beautiful bird had been following them and now it sang to them from a low branch and fluttered its wings, as if saying, "Follow me, follow me!"

So they did and very soon they saw a shape through the trees. The bird went ahead of them and settled... on the roof of a marvellous cottage.

When Hansel and Gretel came closer, they saw that instead of stone, the walls were made of bread and cake, the roof of icing and the windows of clear sugar and everything was decorated with coloured sweets. The happy children ran to the house and hungrily broke off pieces to eat.

They were so hungry and excited they didn't notice someone shuffle out of the cottage! They both jumped when they heard a dry old voice say, "Ah, dear little children, how young you are! — Come with me, come into my little house." Gretel was frightened but Hansel thought no one bad could live in such a wonderful cottage, so they followed the old woman inside.



What Hansel and Gretel didn't know was that the old woman was really a witch; she had built the tasty cottage to attract children and, when she had them safely inside, she would kill, cook, and eat them!

So, having Hansel and Gretel inside the house, she kicked the door shut with a bang! She seized Hansel by the wrist and dragged him to a tiny wooden cage hanging from a beam.

Then she shut and locked the door, leaving Hansel screaming and kicking and Gretel crying miserably in a corner.

"Little boy, little boy, now you're locked in and I can see your small legs all bony and thin," she cackled.

"So you'll eat by day and you'll eat by night, and in under a week you'll be plump all right."

Hansel shouted and Gretel cried, but it was no use. The horrid old woman made Gretel cook huge, fattening puddings for Hansel and watched him eat every scrap.

Each day the old witch would shuffle over to the cage and poke Hansel's leg with her sharp finger to feel how fat he was getting. However, the witch had very poor eyesight and wore extra strong glasses to help her see.

This gave Gretel an idea. She hid the witch's only pair of glasses and then took Hansel a log from the firewood.

He tied the piece of wood onto the end of his shoe and, every time the old woman poked him to see if he was ready for the oven, Hansel made sure she poked not his leg — but the stick! The children managed to fool the old woman for several weeks, but she began to grow impatient.

One morning she suddenly said, "Fat or thin, you shall be my lunch today, little boy!"

Gretel was heartbroken and cried as she worked all morning. The witch made her light the fire under the oven and fetch water to boil, while she prepared dough for the bread. When all was ready the witch called to Gretel.

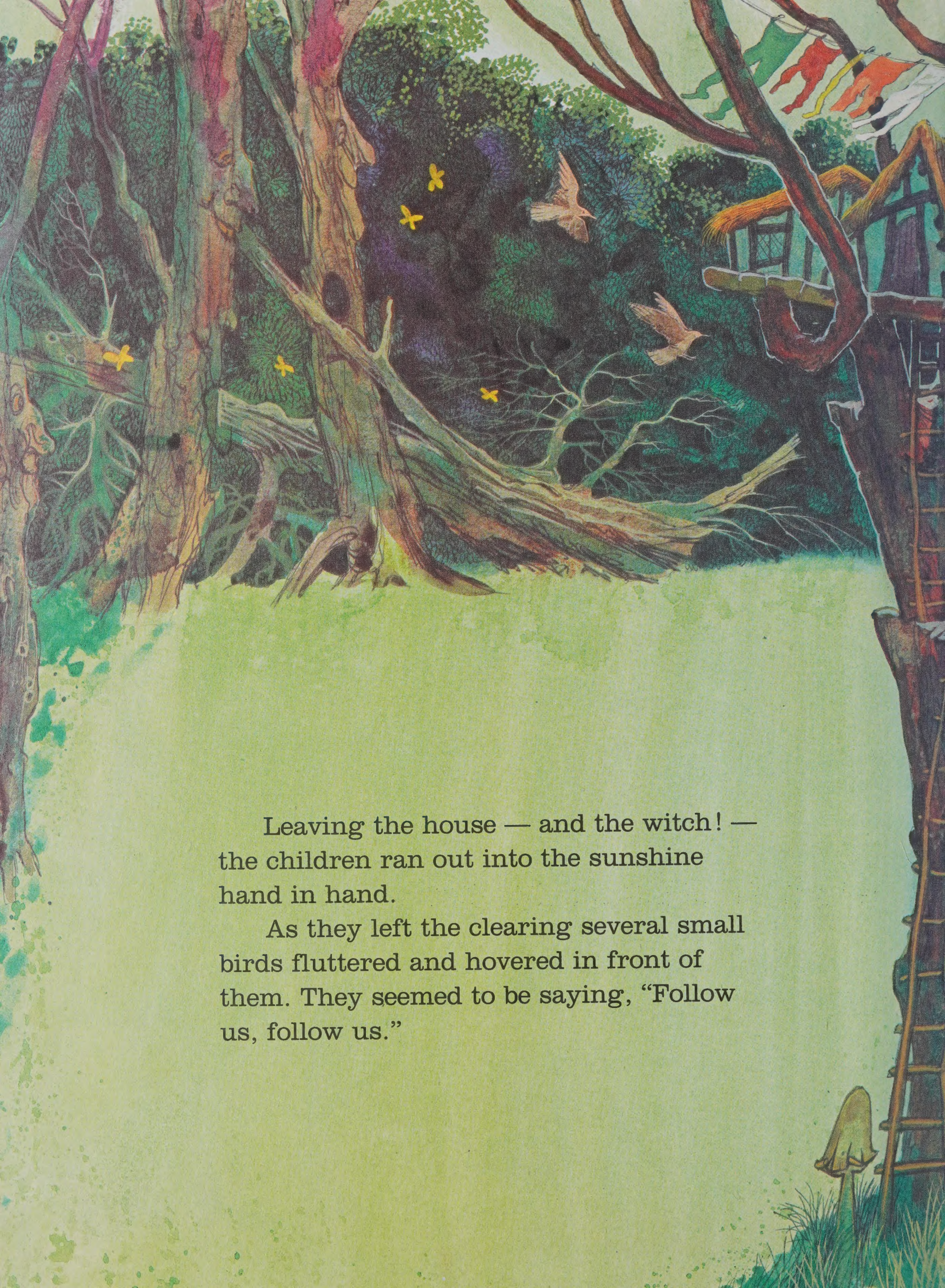
"Creep into the oven, girl," she said. "If it's hot enough we'll bake the bread first."

But, because she was a cunning and wicked old witch, what she really meant to do was push Gretel inside the oven and enjoy both children for lunch! However, in the weeks Gretel had lived with the witch she had grown to mistrust her and now she guessed what was going to happen.

She said, in a little voice, "I don't know how to do it — how do I get in?"

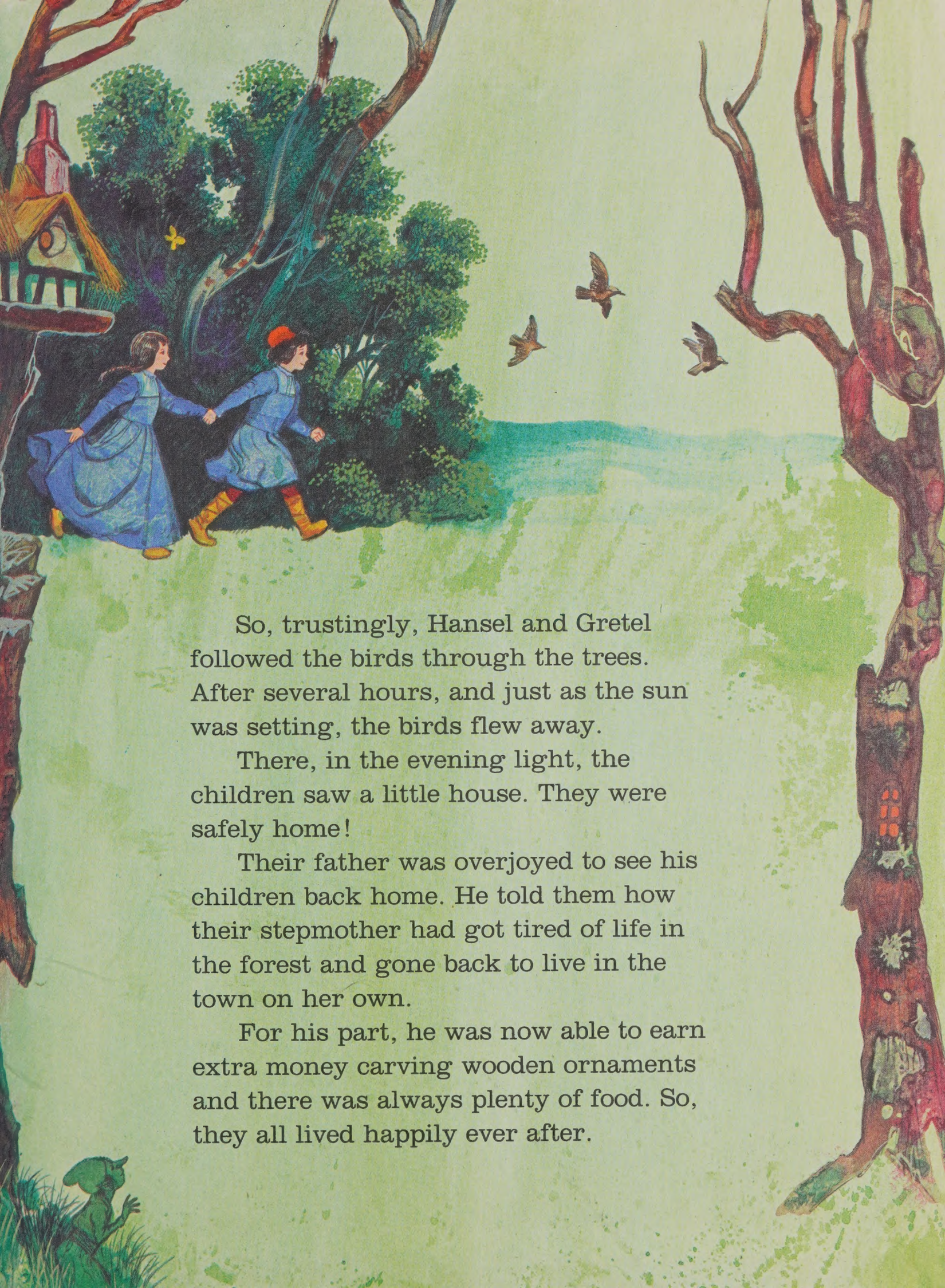
"Stupid girl," said the witch. "There's a door big enough for two like you! I could even get in there myself!" and saying this the old woman put her head and shoulders into the oven. This was just as Gretel had hoped and, with a sharp push from behind, the witch was inside the oven and the door slammed fast behind her — bang! With the witch's howls echoing around the cottage, Gretel snatched up her keys from the table and ran to Hansel.

"We're safe, we're safe!" she cried happily as she opened the cage. "The old witch is in the oven!" Hansel jumped down and hugged his sister — they danced around the cottage laughing and singing until they were quite dizzy!



Leaving the house — and the witch! — the children ran out into the sunshine hand in hand.

As they left the clearing several small birds fluttered and hovered in front of them. They seemed to be saying, "Follow us, follow us."



So, trustingly, Hansel and Gretel followed the birds through the trees. After several hours, and just as the sun was setting, the birds flew away.

There, in the evening light, the children saw a little house. They were safely home!

Their father was overjoyed to see his children back home. He told them how their stepmother had got tired of life in the forest and gone back to live in the town on her own.

For his part, he was now able to earn extra money carving wooden ornaments and there was always plenty of food. So, they all lived happily ever after.

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